# Oh, no — you erased wrong computerfile!

You are tired, you are rushed, and you are "out of room" on your computer's diskette. So you decide to erase an old file.

"Now," you think, "which file hasn't been used in a while? Ah . . . there's a good one, big too. It will make plenty of room if erased. There, type in the command, and it's done. Now I can get on with my work.

"But wait! That was the entire draft of the annual report. All 150 pages. What to do? No problem, just reinstall the backup copy. Oh no, I forgot to make a backup copy. I just erased a month's work!"

If this sounds familiar, don't feel alone. It happens to even the most experienced computer user. Hours, days, and sometimes weeks and months have been wasted because of lost files. So much so that the obvious solution — regular backups — is now standard practice in most business environments. But doing regular backups is time consuming and sometimes tedious, and as a result, frequently overlooked.

Even when backups are performed regularly, they're often not done until the end of the day, or worse, at the end of the week. In these cases, files accidentally erased may not have been backed up at all.

## All is not lost

But, fortunately, because of some little-known facts concerning computer files, perhaps 75 percent of all lost data can actually be retrieved. Here's why:

✔ When you "erase" a file, it actually remains on your disk — only the directory entry is amended so it appears to be gone. That's why most files can be recovered by a program that simply rewrites the directory entry.

✔ Second, almost all lost files result from human error. Power surges, spikes, or noise on the line cause losses as well. But simple "mistakes" are the main culprit.

✓ Finally, most people realize they made a mistake almost immediately. This is important because, if you want to retrieve an erased file, you must act at once — before the newly available space on your disk is overwritten by other files.

Two programs — "Unerase" and "Reclaim" — work beautifully in these situations. Unerase is a command that comes with a set of programs called The Norton Utilities ($99). It works on the IBM PC and similar computers that use the MS-DOS operating system. The other, Reclaim, works on computers that use the CP/M operating system. It is part of a set of commands called Power ($169). Both are generally available or can be ordered through local computer stores.

I reviewed and tested both programs, and found the following: First, they are rather difficult for non data-processing trained people to operate. The manuals, while OK for programmers, are not easy to understand. Nonetheless, the commands work if you follow them in a step-by-step sequence.

The question then is: Should you buy one, or both, of the programs now in the event you might need one in the future? If it was handy, you'd probably try it out to retrieve a newly erased file. If you work for a large company, many machines might be "covered" by just one copy of the program sitting on the shelf. So a strong case could be made for the investment.

On the other hand, if you have only one computer, another alternative might be to call local computer stores and ask if they stock the program. If you find one that does, maybe you can wait and buy it only when and if you need it. This way, the cost of the program stays in your pocket, not on your shelf in the form of a rarely used program.

Rather than buy one of the programs, another alternative is to inquire how much it would cost for a consultant to come to your office, program in hand, to do the file retrieval for you. This could be easier and more cost-effective than actually owning it yourself.

A word of warning: Both programs are complicated "utilities" (a name often used for programs that perform system-level operations). They are meant for use by experienced computer users. If you don't consider yourself experienced, don't try to handle the problem yourself. It's best to call in an expert who is already familiar with them.

## Recommendation

Considering the pros and cons, my recommendation is not to rush out and buy the programs just in case you might need one of them. But be aware of them. Then, upon encountering a situation where an important file appears to be gone, follow these procedures.

First, try to retrieve the file from your last backup disk.

Second, call up a computer expert who might lead you to find the missing file. It could have been filed accidentally in the wrong subdirectory, and the expert might talk you through a search of subdirectories before suggesting you take further steps.

And finally, if all else fails, don't touch the computer until your expert arrives. The expert probably will bring his own bag of tricks, so you don't need to invest in either programs.

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